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THE DANGERS OF EXAMINATIONS

EXAMINATIONS are the children of degree-giving; hence their day of birth falls in the Middle Ages, and it is not to be wondered at that they carry with them traces of the mediæval atmosphere.

Before Frederick Barbarossa incorporated the University of Bologna in 1158, no one ever heard of a degree or of an examination. Neither Plato nor Aristotle, neither Varro nor Quintilian ever passed or gave examinations, yet they somehow acquired an education, and imparted it with unusual success to others. In the high schools, examinations are the children of the diploma, and as such are the most efficient aids in making the machine system of the school felt. The child wins the diploma on the installment plan and the examinations are the coupons which he must take up on presentation. This diploma worship, somewhat by the teacher, very much by the pupil and parent, is one of the most insidious idolatries that has ever defiled the fair temple of education, and the high priests of the true goddess too often openly incite, alas! almost always silently acquiesce, until hope almost fails us that there be any left who have not bowed the knee to Baal.

That schools will ever be free from the tyranny of diploma and examination may be an Utopian expectation. I am inclined to think that like the bill of divorcement, they have been given to us because of the hardness of our hearts, and are destined to be with us for many years. The question is how can they be made our servants instead of threatening to be our masters. How can the genius who has spread himself out like a cloud over our heads be coaxed back again into his bottle, until we deftly slip the stopple in? Genii are very good things—sometimes. They do much in this world; but on the whole they are a great deal better corked than when uncorked.

Examinations may perhaps be best relegated to their proper place by considering what they really do for the scholar, and how they do it. We must take exception at once to the dictum of Mr. Latham when he says: "Examinations, though good for boys, are bad for men," and feel inclined to say, "Physician, drink your own concoction. What is too vile for you is too vile for us also." We demand that the case of the boy be heard.

For the most part high schools are free from the evil of prize examinations, except as the colleges hold the sword of Damocles over them in admission examinations, or dangle before them the bauble of a few paltry dollars for the boy, and a line in the catalogue for the school. Putting these aside as bad without discussion, as a perversion of ends, and a lesson in distorted values, a lesson which has done wrong to many a boy and many a parent, we ask: What is the office of examinations, and what is their educational value? The answer is not far to find. It has been on your lips and it has been on mine. *They test the qualifications of the pupil and they stimulate him to greater effort.* Now I wish to show that both of these values have been most fearfully overestimated.

What do they test?—the teacher? They may be a very good test for a bad teacher, and a very poor one for a good teacher; not exactly a scientific test then;—something like the test for witches. Given in regular doses they will make a very poor teacher out of a very good one in a very short time.

But do they test the pupil? Yes, his knowledge, but in its lowest form. It does not show how the concepts are formed in the mind, how they are related to each other for living activity. The concepts may be in the mind in good shape to pass an examination, and in very poor shape to form a *man*. After all it is of full as much importance how a thing is in a man's head and how it came there, as whether it is there or not. It is the relation that is the all-important thing. This makes our character. This makes our weal or woe.

But there is another kind of examination which we say tests

power. Examinations in mathematics, in sight translations, in questions involving judgment. Much better; and in so far as these tend to develop power, better yet, but the condition of making this a test on which hangs a fictitious degree of value, real to the scholar, is not at all conducive to developing that power which it is the aim to test. The high-strung, nervous boy who needs no test, and the teacher knows it, too often is almost paralyzed mentally; discouragement follows; while the I-don't-care-boy comes out ahead and excuses to himself his inactivity and idleness of the past by his equanimity in the present. Thus the boy you have no desire to stimulate is brought to a fever heat and his neighbor left unmoved.

But the end of our education is not knowledge merely—it is not development of power merely—but in the words of President Adams, it is preëminently “the awakening of certain desires that will serve the pupil as a sort of perpetual inspiration through life.” And there is no form of examination yet devised which will test this; more—there is no form of examination which does not by its very nature deaden and throttle this. Every examination as now conducted carries with it the implication of a finishing, a rounding up. You say, “Yes, this is its merit;” but I say, “No, it is its greatest demerit.” You will write on your diploma then, “has finished a course of study,” but I will write, “is now better prepared to live.” School should be an opening, not a closing, and so it seems to me most appropriate that commencement should come at the end. As a true test then it must be confessed that examinations fill a very inferior place, and we as teachers will do well to continually remind ourselves and our pupils and the public of this marked inferiority. It is largely our fault as teachers that they were ever extolled to such a lofty position.

The second merit claimed for examinations is that they stimulate the pupil to greater work. Now there are stimuli and stimuli. There is the stimulus of the whip, and teachers said once that they could not teach school without it. They declared of this, “though good for boys it is bad for men.”

There is the stimulus of the cutting voice of the sarcastic teacher, and there is the stimulus of the machine system concentrated in the examination. All are external stimuli, they come from without. The only true stimulus comes from within, the stimulus of interest. If you count upon anything else, though you have the appearance of success for a time, when lives are measured you will score a failure. Examinations as a stimulus tend to develop the coffee-pot memory. The pot is no better after being emptied than it was before, perhaps a little worse. What we learn stays with us not a day longer than we had an interest that it should. Little wonder that our scholars forget so fast when the examination is passed. But I am confident that in the good schools below the colleges the instances of abuse in this crass form are rare. It is rather in obscuring the true end from the eyes of the scholar, and even from the eyes of the good teacher that the danger lies. Like the man with the muck rake in *Pilgrim's Progress*, our eyes are fastened on the ground and we fail to see the crown above our heads. If *we*, ourselves, can lift our eyes to it, only now and then, what can we expect of the scholar? He may easily live and die a child of the dragon's teeth; born of the earth and buried again in its bosom. He may never know that the greatest joy of life is to learn, and that knowledge sought for knowledge's sake alone is that wisdom which is the true queen of effort; that wisdom of which Solomon said: "She is more precious than rubies; and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared to her." Such wisdom is not to be gained by the stimulus of examinations.

We may sum up, then, the answers to the claims of examinations. While they test, they test in a very poor and incomplete way; while they stimulate, they stimulate to low ends and obscure the higher.

There are three questions which must not fail to have a hearing whenever examinations are discussed: *first*, the question of moral influence, *second*, the question of overpressure, and *third*, the question of mechanical uniformity.

The temptation to dishonesty at examinations is one of the greatest moral trials the schools offer and it comes in a peculiarly deceptive form. There is honor among thieves, and in like manner there is a code of morality among schoolboys by which they recognize themselves as the third estate *versus* the teacher, the second estate. We all know this is wrong, but we are equally aware of its truth, and that unless the greatest care is used, it is sure to display itself in an examination involving marks. Now why is it that the boy otherwise of sound principles is so often careless here? I believe there are two facts which perhaps unconsciously and yet with right influence the boy. First, he recognizes that the importance placed upon the test is more or less overdrawn, and more or less artificial; that the teacher in this very fact has him on the hip, and, well,—all's fair in war. The second fact is the element of chance which enters into every examination. The boy has learned this by experience, and has come to know that within certain limits it does not differ so very much from a respectable raffle after all. Either of these elements vitiate the examination as a means of character training, and the teacher in conducting the examination must sail between Scylla and Charybdis. He must either watch with falcon eye, and the boy seeing that the teacher judges him capable of knavery concludes that he might as well get the profit of his reputation, given a good chance; or with all confidence in the integrity of the boy, devote himself to his other work, and the temptation being too great for the support, honor falls. Happy the teacher who is able to sail the straits and neither be cast on the rocks of Scylla nor sucked into the whirlpool of Charybdis. And all this to what end? To determine whether the boy shall be eighty-five or ninety. All of which the teacher if he were a good teacher knew perfectly well before.

Alas for the necessity of telling our pupils, good, bad, and indifferent, four times a year, just what we think of them! O that that custom may soon come, by which all men shall issue to their friends, four times a year, a detailed statement of what

they think of them. Then thanks to the aid of written examinations, perhaps, we soon, as well as the schoolboy, shall realize the wish of the poet,

“ Oh wad some pow'r the giftie gie us,
To see oursel's as others see us ! ”

Of the danger of overpressure in examinations enough has been said to warn the most thoughtless. It is only necessary to remind that this danger is especially great at the period of life of the high school when the growing and developing youth are little able to bear without injury the nervous strain—least of all the girls.

Examinations tend to produce mechanical uniformity in our scholars, they crush out spontaneity, they repress individuality; two of the greatest gifts that Heaven has given us. It is a fact worthy of our deepest consideration that the great geniuses of the world have rarely done well in our schools. They seem to have developed in spite of the school rather than through its care. Shall we in despair say with Ribot that education is only good for men of mediocre talents? Shall we not rather say it is the fault of the system, and seek in every way to free that system of its repressing factors?

Examinations cause both teacher and pupil to overestimate the value of those studies which lend themselves readily to examination as test, and in all subjects to overestimate that part which can be measured. Examination answering becomes an art in itself, so that I am tempted to quote here words from Professor Huxley that may not be without interest—at least to the suburban resident.

“ Experienced friends of mine do not hesitate to say students whose career they watch appear to them to become deteriorated by the constant effort to pass this or that examination, just as we hear of men's brains becoming affected by the daily necessity of catching a train. They work to pass, not to know, and outraged Science takes her revenge. They do pass, and they don't know. I have passed sundry examinations in my time, not without credit, and I confess I am ashamed to think how very little real

knowledge underlay the torrent of stuff which I was able to pour out on paper."

Now what remedies can we offer to these dangers of examinations?

Simply this: Not that the examination be abolished, but that it be put in its proper place, in the eyes of the scholar and the eyes of the public; that we have faith in the judgment of the teacher, and the teacher have faith in his own; that the classes be small enough for the teacher to know his pupils, and the teachers good enough to make it worth while for their scholars to know them; that there be an abundance of written work, for much writing makes the accurate man; and that the end of education before our eyes be not knowledge merely, but greater and higher than that, strong, vigorous, moral manhood.

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